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A spectacular outdoor playground

There's more to Utah than Mormons and weak beer, Margaret Davis discovers

UTAH can be easily overlooked among the huge range of holiday destinations on offer in a country as vast as the United States.

Mention Salt Lake City to any Brit, and it will conjure up images of Mormons, weak beer and the 2002 Winter Olympics.

In fact, Utah has much more to offer than that, especially for holidaymakers wanting to escape the daily grind and shake off the cobwebs in a spectacular

outdoor playground.

The western state is perhaps best known for skiing and winter sports, but remains a quite breathtaking rocky wilderness when there is no snow on the ground.

Its landscape ranges from Alpine-esque mountains to the red rock made famous by the movie *Thelma And Louise* and legendary cowboy actor John Wayne.

The Swiss Mormons who first settled in Midway's Heber Valley, less than an hour's drive from Salt Lake City airport, were drawn to the Wasatch Mountains because they were reminded of their home nation.

Their legacy lives on in a slightly eccentric shape at the Swiss-themed Zermatt resort, where visitors are greeted by a bronze statue of a bear playing an accordion – in tribute to a man who would don fancy dress every

year on Swiss Day.

Meticulous attention has been paid to the interior, with furnishings, carvings and wood sourced from Europe, and it is a very relaxing place to stay.

Even in the absence of snow, the area is a beautiful place to visit.

The Homestead Resort, opposite Zermatt in Midway, boasts a natural crater filled with warm spring water all year round, encased by a beehive dome of rock.

Further south, the landscape radically changes with Grand Canyon-style scenery. Fuel yourself up for a walk at Ray's in Green River, a genuine American road house with pool tables, jukebox and great burgers.

This is the beginning of film-set style surroundings which leave visitors with a huge smile – and stopping every two minutes to take photos.

Dead Horse Point, half a mile from where the dramatic climax of *Thelma*

And *Louise* was filmed, gives a jaw-dropping view, looking out over the Colorado River. Without the water, you could be forgiven for thinking you were on Mars.

The spine-tingling sights continue in Arches National Park, with its monoliths and sheer rock faces. Utah is simply vast, and it is a unique feeling to be surrounded by yawning miles of natural landscape. But visitors do not just come to stand and stare. A wide range of outdoor activities are available throughout the year.

For the more adventurous

holidaymaker, there is white-water rafting on the Colorado River, led by expert guides who steer rubber vessels between the rocks. It's genuine fun for any group, with stretches of calm, flat water punctuated by adrenalin-pumping rapids. The ride is like a log flume crossed with a rollercoaster.

Moab, the small town where raft operator Sheri Griffiths is based, attracts hordes of active types all through the summer and has a sprinkling of shops, bars and restaurants which cater for the crowds.

It has a friendly and welcoming feel, including great Mexican food and Miguel's Baja Grill, but if you fancy a few drinks after dinner remember to take ID with you. In some bars you may also need to become a member and pay a fee of a few dollars, or buy a bowl of fries or nachos to have with your drinks.

Once you've finished soaking up the atmosphere around Moab, a more relaxed river expedition awaits on the San Juan River, leaving from Bluff. The archaeological trip will see your guide explain the spectacular geology of the surrounding area, with stops to see ancient paintings and ruins on the way.

However, both the boat trips come with a health warning: in autumnal rain it gets really cold, so bring waterproofs and warm clothes. The rafting in particular will get you completely, utterly soaked, even through the splash suits provided.

Another great place to embrace the



great outdoors is Capitol Reef National Park, which has a variety of hikes. The Sulphur Canyon route, classed as moderate, was mostly easy going but we visited when the river water was "higher than it had been for five years" according to our guide Scott.

This meant a good deal more scrambling over rock ledges and climbing down fairly steep drops than intended, but it was fantastic fun.

Coming back to urban surroundings, Salt Lake City is a pleasant and nicely laid-out town, with chances for fine dining and a night out in a bar, as well as good shopping during the day.

So when you plan your next holiday, give Utah a chance – you'll come back fully refreshed and fired up with a new enthusiasm for the outdoors.

GARDENING

GET THERE

■ Margaret was a guest of Utah Office of Tourism and she flew to Salt Lake City via Chicago with United Airlines.

■ United Vacations offers seven-night fly-drive visits to Utah this summer from £565, including return flights into Salt Lake City (via Chicago), free connecting flights into London from six regional UK airports.

■ United Vacations also offers a 12-day pre-packaged fly-drive tour of the Canyons, via Nevada, Arizona, Utah and Colorado from £1,035, incl return sched flights ex-London, into Las Vegas, all taxes and free connecting flights from six regional airports.

■ United Vacations reservations: 0844 499 2299 and www.unitedvacations.co.uk

KEY FACTS

■ **BEST FOR:** Outdoor adventure and stunning scenery.

■ **TIME TO GO:** All year you can experience white tops (for skiers) to red rocks, for summer adventurers.

■ **DON'T MISS:** Five national parks which are stunning for

scenery and native American culture.

■ **NEED TO KNOW:** As it is not a dry state, you can drink alcohol. Also, this is the home of umpteen movies, from John Wayne to Tom Cruise.

■ **DON'T FORGET:** Your camera.

PASSPORT

SAFARI holidays in Africa will be affordable for many more families than usual this summer, as some of the finest camps and lodges respond to the downturn by tailoring packages with special rates for younger visitors.

It also helps that Kenya is halving the price of visitors' visas for adults, while under-16s needn't pay anything at all. With deals in Zambia, Namibia and Botswana, the value of the rand continues to lure Brits to South Africa.

Families Worldwide has cut prices on 16-day East Africa Overland trips to Kenya and Tanzania from August 13 to start at £1,899 per child (minimum age seven) and £2,340 per adult. Kenya highlights includes a giraffe sanctuary, flamingo watching on Lake Nakuru and safari drives, and in Tanzania there's Lake Victoria and the Serengeti reserve.

In recent weeks, price cuts running into hundreds of pounds have been confirmed by operators including The Adventure Company, Cox And Kings and Kuoni, while Somak brought out a special brochure – Eye Catching Offers – which travel agents can overbrand with their own logos.

Somak offers a five-star Cheetah Safari in Kenya, based on new deluxe accommodation at Ashnil Samburu Camp, from £1,385 on selected dates in 2009, including return flights.

African and Indian Explorations has an eight-night fully-inclusive Zambia safari offer, including four days at The Zambesi Vintage Camp and promising the authentic adventure of a specialist walking safari in 1920s style, from £2,060 – saving £1,470. But return flights into Lusaka – with BA, Air France, or KLM – are likely to cost an additional £800 per person.

In Kenya, Governors' Camp luxury safaris – which include the original tented safari camp featured in the BBC's Big Cat series – promise savings up to 35% on bookings made at least four months prior to travel until December 25, subject to availability.

You can stay at both its centres, Loldia House on Lake Nakuru National Park and Main Governors' Camp in the Masai Mara in a six-night Kuoni package from £2,199, including one night in Nairobi and Kenya Airways return flights.

Aardvark Safaris offers an eight-night safari for the price of six for £3,392 at any of the Buscamp Company's properties within South Luangwa, Zambia. Include any one of these five Buscamps with the new walking camp Zungulila and/or Mfuwe Lodge.

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1 & 2. Jeeps and cycling in Moab,
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3. Salt Lake City
4. Chimney Rock, Capitol Reef

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